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Interview October 18, 1964 in the home of Mrs. Carroll on Midland Avenue.
Pack Memorial Library staff member John Bridges interviews Grace Potter (Mrs. Robert S.) Carroll and Dr. Arnold Dann, who both knew Bela Bartok during the time he was in Asheville in 1944.

JB: This is October 18, 1964. We're sitting in the living room of Mrs. Robert S. Carroll on Midland Drive in Asheville. I am John Bridges of the Pack Memorial Public Library staff and our conversation with Mrs. Carroll and with Dr. Arnold Dann, formerly of Asheville, now of Ormond Beach, Florida. This in regard to some of their memories of Bela Bartok in the time that he spent in Asheville. This recording is being made as primary source material for any qualified scholars who might be interested in hearing it at some future time to preserve the memories of these people who did actually know Bartok in Asheville.

Dr. Dann, would you care to tell me some of the circumstances that brought Bela Bartok to Asheville?

AD: Well, yes, it helps. He was sick. He was in the last stages of tuberculosis. I don't know who his doctor was in Asheville.

JB: I see. In other words, the decision for Bella Bartok to come to Asheville was made in New York by physicians who all ready knew about Asheville.

AD: Right, that's true.

JG: Did you know that he was coming to Asheville? Had you heard that he was coming before he arrived?

AD: No. I didn't, but Mrs. Carroll did.

JG: Mrs. Carroll, I believe you had some prior knowledge?

GC: Yes, I knew a member of the faculty of the New School of Social Science in New York who was a Hungarian and life-long friend of the Bartoks, and also a good friend of an old classmate of mine from the Vienna days. And he considered Bartok the great composer of the century. So he wrote a letter to me, asking that we do what we could in any way, to help Mr. Bartok adjust, since he knew no one in Asheville.

JB: I see. So it was actually you who introduced Dr. Dann to Bartok?

GC: That is right.

JB: I see, this is very interesting. Now we have heard a number of conflicting stories about where Bartok stayed in Asheville.

AD: The Albemarle Inn.

JB: Yes, but you see, there have been several different buildings which have been given the name Albemarle Inn. At one time, the old Von Ruck home over on Von Ruck Court was called the Albemarle Inn.

AD: That wasn't it.

JB: But this was not it? Is it the Albemarle Inn that was just off Macon Avenue over in the vicinity of---

AD: I think so.

JB: So that is the place where Bartok actually stayed?

AD: That's right. And further more, though it wasn't generally known, I believe, that for a few days, even Count Maeterlinck came there.

[Maurice Maeterlinck (1862-1949) was a Belgium dramatist, poet, naturalist, and philosopher.]

JB: Yes, I –No, this was at the Manor, because I remember this vividly. This was while I was in high school that Maurice Maeterlinck came to Asheville. And I remember I tried to work up courage enough to ask for an interview to see him, since I'd always admired his work, but I didn't do so. And the same with Bartok.

AD: Well, Mr. Bartok introduced me to him. We tried to get him to talk, particularly about Pelleas et Melisande.

JB: So, Bartok and Maeterlinck where in Asheville at the same time?

AD: Yes.

JB: Well, this I had never known.

AD: Yes, but Maeterlinck was only here for two or three days, as I remember. I was there one night, Mr. Bartok took me up there one night, rather. And we just wanted him to talk about Pelleas and especially his connection with Debussy. But all he would talk about was bugs. Bees, specifically. And we weren't interested in that. He invited us back the next night, well Maeterlinck did, I'm not saying Bartok did either.

[Maeterlinck often drew on his close study of nature in his essays. In *The Life of the Bees (1901)* and *Life and Flowers* (1907) he used his appreciation and understanding of nature as the basis for analysis of human behavior." World Book Encyclopedia]

JB: Well, I understood that Maeterlinck always had a rather unpleasant feeling about the Debussy work because his friend Georgette Le Blanc did not---

GC: --His wife.

JB: Yes, well not at that time, I don't believe. Later, perhaps. But, there was some disagreement about who should perform Melisande in the (French performance.??)

AD: When Debussy got to know Mary Garden, that was the end of Count Maeterlinck's wife singing the title?? At any rate, we're talking about Mr. Bartok.

JB. Yes, how very true. But Bartok and Maeterlinck did have a conversation when they were in Asheville?

AD: Yes, they certainly did. They certainly did.

JB: But nothing of import came of it?

AD: No, no.

JB: Well, tell us about your first meeting with Bartok.

AD: Well my first meeting with Bartok was after Mrs. Carroll introduced him, he wanted somebody to look over his book on Turkish folk music, which he had written in English. And because he was able now to write legible and very good grammatically correct English. But there were certain things in it that weren't quite right. At any rate, that was my principal association with him--was that book. And with his great love for Shakespeare. He was now reading—he knew Shakespeare in German, he knew Shakespeare in Hungarian, or Schopeenhauer, or whatever it was, and he was now able to read Shakespeare in the vernacular, and that was his great joy. Other wise, he was miserable. He long pined for Budapest and his friends there, and of course his former position there.

JB: How long was Bartok in Asheville?

AD: I don't know, I think about five months--four or five months. Yes, that was in '44.

JB: Did he ever mention to you any other musical projects that he was working on at the time?

AD: No, except that he was doing the transcription for piano of his concerto for orchestra, which the Koussevitzky Foundation required to be deposited with the original score.

JB: I see. Would you care to recount the delightful anecdote which you told us at dinner?

AD: It really was very good, and it was typical of his quiet humor. He called one day, and said come in, he had something to show me, and he got the full score on the top of my piano, and then sheets of music paper underneath, and ????_____ and for the first seven or eight bars, he got trills right up at the top of the piano, and little twiggles like at the bottom, and right in the middle he had great big blocks of chords. And I said to him, "What in the world are you doing? You know that's unplayable." And he said, "Yes, but I think nobody will ever see this, nobody will ever take the trouble to look at it. I don't think anybody will ever try to play it. But if they do, I have set them a problem." And that was typical.
And he was a quiet leg puller, too. He was at a program we gave at Homewood, a Brahms'[illegible] program, in which I had the ____?? of playing the ____'s variation, and I don't know if it was the tenth or twelfth, I inadvertently played a B natural instead of a B flat. Three weeks later, Bartok comes into the house, and he says, "Arnold, what is your authority for playing a B natural in the seventh or eighth variation of the Handle variation." And I said, "Well, you know as an authority, it was a slip of the fingers and the offering of a slipped tune." And that was the end of it, he just laughed. It was just his quiet way of sort of leg pulling. He had a very keen sense of humor.

JB: I believe you mentioned one time Mrs. Carroll, about the performance that he attended at Homewood. Was this the only time that he went out, you might say, in Asheville?

GC: As far as I know. It was the evening where the All Soul's choir, which Dr. Dann, of course, conducted, gave an evening. He'd asked not to be with a large group of people but in the library upstairs. And he said anyone who would be especially interested, that we could bring up to speak to him. It was something very gentle, nothing apologetic about it John, he was a very sick man. Tell him about the "mews"--the word in the Shakespeare.....

AD: Well, he'd come around with a sixth pitch____? from time to time and ask me what this word meant or that word meant. I didn't know any more than he did, but I did have a Shakespeare lexicon, of sorts, and could look some of it up. But he came one day, he'd just been reading Richard III, and he came across one of Hasting's pieces, "More pity the ego, should be mewed, while tripes and buzzards pray at liberty." Well, this word "mewed" stuck in his cup, as it were. Well he comes on, and hauls me out of bed to find out what "mewed" was. And while he had a general idea of the meaning of the line, yet he wanted to know the precise meaning of the word. Which of course needless to tell him, had to do with a cat, things of that sort. And ____ dictionary ???

JB: With Bartok's great interest in his own and other people's folk music, did he ever hear any of our local folk music while he was here?

AD: No, I don't believe so, not as far as I know.

JB: Now, we have heard a great deal about the possibility that he was completing the third piano concerto while he was in Asheville. Is there any truth to that?

AD: I don't think so, at least I don't know anything of it. As a matter of fact, I think that was written before he came to Asheville.

JB: Did you have a comment to make about this Mrs. Carroll?

GC: I understood that he used the bird songs that he heard when in Asheville, in that concerto, and that is the reason it is called by many, the Asheville Concerto.

JB: I see, so apparently there is some truth to the story that he was doing a little writing here.

AD: Well, that's what I was going to say. He never discussed any of his music, except this Turkish stuff. And it shows his utter childlikeness, not childishness, but childlike, so natural and so normal, that a, when some verses in some of these things have to be blue penciled. He couldn't understand it. And all the lines, you know, dealing with subtly and all sorts, that were of course natural to the people of the hinterland of Turkey and that area. And he said, "This is natural with these people." And I'd say, "Yes, but it isn't natural with the people who are going to read this book. And you might as well save yourself the trouble, because nobody will publish it." And he was very much upset because this, what we would call "filth" couldn't be included. And what I was saying at the table, he was trying to—a lot of the cadences in this music, of course can't be played on a keyboard. They can only be played on a stringed instrument or sung. Because you're dealing with slides and slithers and quarter tones and he was trying though, he spent a lot of time, in trying to get them, to bring out a form of notation that would represent them, as near as possible on a keyboard.

JB: His book has never been published, has it?

AD: No, no. He had to give it up, it wasn't practical.

JB: I see. Had it been commissioned by the Turkish government?

AD: The Turkish government. Yes.

JB: Yes, I was under that impression.

AD: And incidentally, he had something like 10,000 examples (?) in his trunk here.

JB: Oh, he brought the musical examples with him when he came to Asheville?

AD: Yes, that he'd made. And, of course, he talked about his difficulties were of two kinds. In the first place, a lot of these native yokels, they were suspicious of a foreigner coming in, and others, they were hesitant, self conscious, and he had difficulty getting some of them to perform. But he eventually did, and that was the last, of course, of his folk song studies of the Near East.

JB: Yes, Mrs. Carroll, you have something to add?

GC: There was something very interesting about your comment about this, and I would like to add something to that later.

AD: Go ahead.

GC: Well, I recall that he felt that Liszt was the medium through which Hungarian music was misunderstood by most people, because after all, the Rhapsodies, are not the best Liszt music, of course, but they're built upon Egyptian melodies. So, it was he [assumed to mean Bartok not Liszt] and [Zoltan] Kodaly, who went down to Transylvania, in Hungary, and they felt there, they had discovered the real poor (?) Hungarian music.

JB: I remember our friend, Professor Vagrin (?) made a similar observation one time, that real Hungarian folk music does not sound like what we think about.

AD: No, the Egyptian music is not Hungarian folk music--that is quite true. But on the other hand, Mrs. Carroll, you must recognize that this made a marvelous piece for a Hungarian folk song, the Cranes Do Fly (?). And the Hungarian [panthologist?] will count on an orchestra (?).] And Bartok had been a great Liszt player. Also, he was a virtuoso in his younger days. He went second to [Wilhelm] Backhaus in 1905 when they competed for the Reubinstein prize. And Backhaus was normally a virtuoso, I'll tell you. And by the way, he still [hasn't quite got it right??].....(?) [Laughter] Anyway....

GC: I heard him when he first played [sounds like Litsivisky or Leftivisky or Breftivisky??] in [Litsivisky's??] home, Mr. Bartok's. It established his control of the keyboard.

AD: And he was a boy. But he was never exploited as a protégée.

GC: But you know what he [Litsivisky??] said. [perhaps something in a foreign language???????????] Do tell me how you're doing?

AD: Laughter . . . This from Leftivisky . . . laughter.

JB: And Mrs. Carroll, you told me one time, a little something about Bartok having difficulty getting a cab leaving the concert at Homewood. Would you tell us more about that?

GC: I 'm afraid of that, in a way, because it quite discredits our people--our own home people. Knowing that he wanted to leave early, and that we wished to assist him to leave before the others started to simplify it for him, we had ordered a taxi. And we had to order three taxis, because in every instance there was those who had gone ahead, took the taxis, you see. And then, we finally went to the corner, so we could get one for him.

JB: But it seems so in keeping with what we've heard of his character, that he wanted no fuss made, but 'Oh, Let them take it, let them take it.'

GC: And no reference to it, ever afterwards.

JB: Was Bartok completely alone in Asheville? Did any of his family come to visit him while he was living here?

AD: No, not so far as I know.

GC: He told me that it wasn't possible, that in the first place, they were quite restricted. The only reference he ever made to the economical side of things, but that his wife had to stay in New York and teach, because otherwise he could not have come. And also, even when they were there, there apartment was so small that they had to have pianos in separate rooms, so when they played two piano things, they couldn't see each other.

JB: Oh, my. –Dr. Dann, you had some comments, I noticed, pre-prepared on these things.

GC: What did he say about me?

AD: Well, this is all I remember. I jotted it down while I did remember. Because my memory is as squeaky as my old [?] is now. And this is, I think, perfectly true. The idea that the legend that Liszt's interpretation is mostly a feat of virtuosity, where as the [assigned??] Brahms' interpretation is entirely a matter of musicianship, is a mistake. And Bartok tried to show that the reverse is closer to the truth. Well, he's right or wrong—that's his idea, but not the whole truth, obviously. Because, while Liszt's music does require virtuosity, it also requires considerable refinement, particularly, in the--expressive power. [That is what Liszt ??] that he was speaking about, at his best. And because he recognized, as everybody else recognized, that some of the transcriptions--some of the [Liszt??] transcriptions were simply colored popcorn. Such as Rigoletto transcription, William Tell, and so on. On the other hand, some of the transcriptions—the Hundred Songs of Beethovan, and Chopin, Schuman, and Shubert. And particularly the [??Don Giovanni Fantasia ??] and the Lieberstod, and the lovely six--what did they call them—soirees . . .[the Veeve's??]

GC: By [Vivian??].

AD: They were simply marvelous. And, eh, that is the list, also [Feeler's?? often as not] and which he used to play so wonderfully well. Then he would go on to say—reverting back to the—Liszt-Brahms matter, the works of Brahms also require virtuosity, but, and they also require vitality and momentum, which is part of virtuosity technique. And, then, he would go on to say that the Liszt music—the best of it, that's what we're talking about—had its own magic. Unfortunately, of course, when he was here, he couldn't [??] because he was too weak to play. But, he could still talk about it and he was a great Liszt admirer. And he had a good deal to say, for instance, such thing as, [?? for instance] one

I remembered, that the artist and the man were closely allied. Both had dramatic ferocity and also the gentle caress as it were, which of course it manifested true. And he would also point out, that the quassi sonota for example. The pundit, pundits rather, say that it isn't a sonata, and he didn't care about it—he insisted that rather it was a sonata or not a sonata, it was a fine piece of piano music. And it took a [??] to play it, really, which of course [ ?? as you heard.] and that was the general . . .

JB: Did he make any observations on any other contemporary Hungarian composers? Godi for instance?

AD: No.

JB: Did he ever make any observations on the contemporary musical scene in New York? His difficulties?

AD: No. He didn't like New York, and he wouldn't talk about. And because his experience wasn't . . . You see, it was unfortunate. When he came to the United States, he was unknown, his music was unknown. And he was no longer able to play and to attract attention to himself. Now, it was entirely different. For instance, in the earliest days, the BBC had taken him up, and taken his music, and the British people, through his own play and through the playing of chamber music groups, string quartets and so on, the British people were quite familiar with his works. Even his first two piano concertos, which he played very frequently over the BBC, but that didn't apply to the United States, you see. And, of course, his circumstances were limited. And I do know that, because it was [our Blake here, Charles' accountant got volunteers??] income tax return for '43.

JB: Did you have any correspondence with him after he returned to New York?

AD: No. No.

GC: But ask him, or rather, tell what he responded when you asked him why he ever came over to this country.

AD: Well, I don't like to mention that, to well. Well, it's simple enough. As I say, his condition, his physical condition, was aggravated by this intense pining and homesickness, if that's what you call it. And, finally, when I got to know him well enough, I asked him why he came, why he left Budapest. And he said, 'Well, during the War, the Nazi came in, and when they got out and the Reds came in, and I thought they would be worse.' And I said to him, 'Well, look here, after all, they haven't interfered with [Kadoli??] and your other friends.' And he said, 'No, I made a mistake.' [cross talk] That was always . . . his conviction though was quite pathetic.

And then, of course, he had no reference—eh, his own music. He did give me some pieces, but the only piece that I heard him speak about, of his own I mean, with any enthusiasm, was the one Allegro Barbaro, and . . . he . . . couldn't even play that. And then . . . he tried to play it, and he just couldn't.

JB: I'm curious to know why the Albemarle Inn was chosen as the place for him to stay?

AD: I haven't the slightest idea. I rather think, or course, that ASCAP had something to do with his coming here. I think ASCAP partly helped him. But I don't know. And why the inn there was chosen—we did have a rather amusing experience with him on the Brahms night at Homewood the night that Mrs. Carroll has referred to. It was one of those things. The program had been so carefully planned, and everything went wrong. We were late starting, the crowd was, you know, billowed out and we couldn't get started and things dragged and dragged and dragged. Well, the last bus left there at 11:00 and at twenty minutes past ten, I was supposed to play the Handel variation, see. I said to Mr. Bartok, 'I'm going to leave this out, it's too late.' And he said, 'No, I came to hear that.' Well then, I said, well, I said, 'You know each half of each variation is repeated. There're 23 of them and that makes about 46 all together, really.' I said, 'Well, I won't make the repeats.' He said, 'How dare you emasculate Brahms in that way.' I said, 'All right.' And I started [laughter] abruptly about a quarter to eleven [laughter] and I was still variationing and people all over the place were gradually disappearing, you know. [laughter] Naturally, they were trying to get the bus. Any rate, the thing had to come to an end sometime, and here was Bartok there and Mrs. Carroll. Mrs. Carroll phoned for a taxi, to take him back. It was late for the old man. And no taxi came. Well, she phoned again, and still there was no taxi.

GC: Three times.

AD: And then she phoned a third time, and there was still no taxi. And then somebody happened to think that she should phone and tell the man to come to the house.

GC: To the corner. Because ....[cross talk]

AD: Yes, what had been happening, as fast as the taxis came, somebody outside was picking them up. And here was Barok sitting there, and we didn't get him back to the inn until about midnight.

JB: Did you have any Bartok memento, that is any little, maybe a musical example or something that he had written out in long hand?

AD: No. I've got several autographs of him. But that's about all I know about it.

JB: Well, I think that was quite generous.

GC: It was a beautiful enunciation, his speech was.

AD: Hum?

GC: It was a beautiful way of speaking that he had. You might call it the international speech. He had perfect English, and at the same time there was something which you couldn't locate. You couldn't say, this is Hungarian, this is French, or German.

AD: And of course he spoke German without accent.

GC: Oh, beautiful German.

AD: Beautiful German.

JB: Did you ever discuss your background with him?

GC: A little, yea, an impression, but I thought, after all--I left it with him.

JB: I see. Well, we have certainly enjoyed talking with both of you about Bartok, and I think there are a number of antidotes here, perhaps, if someone is ever doing a definitive biography of Bartok, and particularly his years in Asheville, I think that this conversation will be of great benefit to them.